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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS), NEA/PI AND INR
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN ISLAMISTS CONCERNED BY EXTREMISM, SEEK
USG SUPPORT

REF: A. TUNIS 1470
[1](#)B. TUNIS 1329
[1](#)C. TUNIS 1058

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During a November 19 meeting with PolOffs, former an-Nahdha leader Ziad Daoulatli said that the GOT has created a climate of fear that discourages Tunisians from political participation. The lack of freedom of expression and association, said Daoulatli, is increasingly driving Tunisians to violence and extremism, and the banned an-Nahdha party is unable to combat this trend. Therefore, Daoulatli said he and other former an-Nahdha leaders had joined other independent civil society activists, including leftists and communists, to press for greater political liberty in Tunisia. Daoulatli expressed his appreciation for USG efforts to do the same and asked that the Embassy do more to support civil society. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Daoulatli, who was a senior an-Nahdha leader until his arrest in 1991, was pardoned by President Ben Ali in 2004. The an-Nahdha ("Renaissance") party is banned in Tunisia, where parties based on religion are unconstitutional. Today, many former party leaders live in exile, a handful remain in jail and others have been pardoned like Daoulatli. Since his release, Daoulatli says he enjoys freedom of movement within Tunisia, but has been unable to travel abroad as the GOT has been preventing him from submitting a passport application. During the meeting, which was arranged by Radwan Masmoudi, the Tunisian head of the US-based Center for Islam and Democracy, Daoulatli was joined by self-defined Islamic-leftist Slaheddine Jouchi.

A CLIMATE OF FEAR...

[1](#)3. (C) Daoulatli opened the meeting by explaining that the GOT is trying to frighten Tunisians away from participating in public life. This has been successful, because people believe that the GOT is against any and all opposition and will punish anyone who disagrees. Daoulatli stressed that the success of this effort is clearly demonstrated by Tunisians unwillingness to join even "loyal" opposition parties. These parties, which enjoy government subsidies and GOT recognition, cannot gather more than 30 people at their meetings, said Daoulatli. At the same time, Daoulatli added, the GOT seeks to co-opt those groups with popular support,

like the Green Party, journalists' union and bar association, by creating parallel structures that are loyal to the government. He said the GOT must actively try to encourage political participation in order to discourage citizens from turning to violence. Commenting on recent rumors that the GOT might create a religious party, Daoulatli said former an-Nahdha leaders would support this move because it would represent a change in GOT thinking. Specifically, such a step would indicate the government had moved beyond its current security mind set to take actual politics into consideration.

CREATES INSTABILITY

¶4. (C) The security mind set said Daoulatli, leads the GOT to imprison people in an attempt to remove any desire to oppose the government. Even after individuals are released, the GOT continues to "make a model" out of former prisoners by denying them the ability to reintegrate into Tunisian life, e.g. by withholding national identification cards and passports. Jourchi added that many former an-Nahdha leaders are from lower-middle class families, which are unaware of and therefore unable to defend their rights as citizens. He asked that the USG try to encourage prisoner reintegration in society. PolOff asked if President Ben Ali's recent call (Ref A) to improve prisoner reintegration would have a positive impact on the situation. Daoulatli called the announcement "propaganda" and said that no specific steps had been announced yet. What Tunisia really needs, he added, is a general amnesty.

¶5. (C) The inability of former prisoners to reintegrate, Daoulatli said, leads them to seek revenge. Such individuals

are increasingly attracted to the ideologies of Usama Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri. Daoulatli lamented that Bin Laden claims to be the liberator of all Arabs from despotic regimes. He cited the example of a former moderate an-Nahdha leader whose inability to actively participate in society drove his son to join al-Qaeda in Algeria, where he was recently captured. Daoulatli noted that the deteriorating economic situation, specifically corruption, in Tunisia today is also contributing to instability and extremism.

CIVIL SOCIETY UNITES

¶6. (C) Daoulatli added that there must be a successful dialogue between moderate leftists, secularists and Islamists to combat extremism and promote freedom. He himself joined the Movement of 18 October, a disparate group of opposition political leaders and activists promoting freedom of expression, association, and amnesty for political prisoners (Ref C). Daoulatli said that he, and other former an-Nahdha members in the group, had signed two 18 October Committee statements: one on women's rights and another on freedom of conscience. The group plans to issue two others on the relationship between religion and state and the use of corporal punishment. Jourchi opined that an-Nahdha today is weak but popular. However, if political space in Tunisia were to expand, an-Nahdha could be very popular in four to five years. Significant popularity would likely mean the group would encompass both liberal and radical members, although the leadership is moderate.

USG SUPPORT HELPS

¶7. (C) Jourchi asked that such meetings between former an-Nahdha members and the USG continue, so that both sides would understand the other's goals. He said he was encouraged that the US Embassy and the Ambassador were accelerating US support for Tunisian civil society, noting the Ambassador's recent visit to the PDP hunger strikers (Ref

C). Daoulatli added that Tunisian citizens dislike two things: 1) US policies in the Middle East, and 2) Ben Ali's dictatorship. The best way for the USG to combat popular dislike of regional policies, said Daoulatli, is to publicly support democracy in Tunisia.

18. (C) Specifically, Daoulatli asked PolOfs to invite former an-Nahdha leaders to Embassy events, host more discussions of domestic issues, engage civil society activists under GOT pressure (like the PDP), create ties between US and Tunisian NGOs, and press the GOT to lift administrative limitations on former prisoners. Such steps would clearly demonstrate USG commitment to democracy in Tunisia. Former an-Nahdha leaders like himself, said Daoulatli, want to open a dialogue with the USG.

COMMENT

19. (C) With an-Nahdha banned and its former leaders spread throughout Tunisia and abroad, it is unclear if the group truly seeks to participate in a secular democracy, if one could be established in Tunisia. This lack of clarity means that Tunisian popular support is similarly difficult to judge. However, it is easy to support Daoulatli and Jourchi's request that the USG continue to promote political reform and freedom in Tunisia, as they are among our own goals here.
GODEC